

CETL Briefing Papers: The Worked Experience of Facilities Staff at the University of Wolverhampton

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Aims of the Initiative

This is a research programme which considers the worked experience of Facilities staff at the University of Wolverhampton. Through interviewing staff and observing them in their everyday work, this research provides a unique insight into the interaction between facilities staff and students and how these interactions can impact on the induction of new students, their first year experience, retention and progression.

Description of the Initiative

The research is a qualitative study that utilises a cases study methodology and implements observation and one to one interviews with cleaners, security guards, catering staff and caretakers about their worked experience at the University. A picture of interaction between students and staff has been observed that to date has not been commented on within the literature. Observations have taken place on Open Days, when students moved in to Halls of Residence, throughout Freshers' Weeks and other times during the Undergraduate first semester. Observations of the actions and interactions of these staff groups were made and detailed notes were taken to catalogue the nature of each action and interaction. Follow up interviews were completed with staff after observation were carried out, to discuss their beliefs and perceptions of their worked experience. The collected data was interrogated to identify categories of activities of each group of staff engage in during their average working day. A thematic analysis was implemented to identify common themes that arose from discussions.

Evaluation and impact of the Initiative

The current programme is still in progress and has does not intend to measure impact. As a consequence, this section overviews the observed and reported impact of the interactions between students and facilities staff.

Initial information from interview about worked experience of the facilities staff indicates that staff discuss:

- terms and conditions
- work activities
- social engagement

Of these topics, social engagement was discussed most and was of the greatest importance. Although these staff groups interact with all groups within the university, they make more interactions with student than any other group.

The observation data indicates that the interactions between these staff and students have a number of purposes, which are not only focused on meeting the physical and practical needs of the students but also meeting some of their emotional needs. These interactions fall into several categories:

- Information provision: How to navigate the University and local environment; facilities that available; issues relating to cultural competency.
- Social interactions: These staff often recognise students and will acknowledge them, they get to know some students on a more personal basis and will engage in personal exchange. Cultural exchange is apparent with international students
- Support in times of tension: These staff are more supportive when students move into halls, during Freshers' Week, when assignment submission and during exam weeks.

Through providing ongoing support while students settle into the University and during times of tension, students are helped to integrate and embed into the University. Further, these staff provide low grade support that students would not access student services or counselling to gain. Interactions with this staff impact positively on the student experience and retention.

- Students are having a hard time, these staff support and this may help them to stay.
- Also when people are unhappy or anxious their capacity to engage with academic work is limited. The interaction with these staff may also mediate this.
- When stressed verbal and written information is harder to take in. These staff groups often physically take students places, show them places and introduce them to who they need to see.

Interviews reveal that these staff perceive customer care as being crucial to their role and see that it is their job to ensure that the student have a positive experience of the university. Through observation, it is noted that these staff add to students learning experience because they staff the social learning space and keep formal learning spaces open, but also add to students' social experience. Through their social interactions with students they add to the friendliness of the University.

Interviews have also identified four critical moments when these staff groups help support students:

- Welcome week: arrival at academic halls is devoid of academic staff. Facilities staff are the first staff that students meet. They provide a sense of what the university is and what they are going to engage with and embed themselves into.
- Theft and how this is tackled is important to the student experience and whether they stay at the university. Bullying and attack are often not reported but are often tackled or mediated by facilities staff.
- Leaving and returning from placements – staff provide support to students who feel stressed about going to placement. They also welcome them back which helps mediate the return to the academic environment. Some students may find return difficult after being in a placement for a year.
- Times of Heavy/Stressful Workload: when students have lots of essay or exams or stressful times during their assessment these staff provide for their physical needs. They also provide a safety net for students who need more help. As they are mobile they often encounter students expressing distress that they would not express in public or a planned encounter. These staff provide on the spot support and help and sign post to the available support services.

The contact the students have with these staff groups is important to the student experience for a number of reasons:

- The opportunities for face to face contact between students and staff are decreasing. Staff to student ratios are decreasing. Students are encouraged to access library services remotely, to register online and to access online counselling services.
- On split campuses support services are not equally distributed. Most services are available at City; however students are split over five campuses.
- Some students are not on campus when the University support services are open. This is particularly relevant to part time evening students. These staff groups are those that these students meet most and are available to provide the information and support they require.
- These staff are available on campus 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, so they are here when other staff groups are not here.
- Uncomplicated communication: These are the only interactions that students have with university staff that are free from assessment.

Policy Implications

- Organisational & HE Sector Level: It should be recognised that staff provide these services for students, but should not be expected of them to do so.
- Organisational & HE Sector Level: Social/Emotional/ Critical Moments identified in the piece of work should be considered in relation to student retention and progression

Expert Contacts and Links

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